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INCUBI AND NIGHTMARES IN MIDDLE-ENGLISH LITERATURE[°]

Ulysses has recently come back to his native Ithaca, but he is still disguised and has not revealed his identity to his wife Penelope, who tells him of her years of waiting and of her fears about her husband's fate. She narrates a dream she has had foreshadowing his return, and wonders about its veracity. Ulysses encourages her to hope and to have absolute faith in the dream, but Penelope's doubts are grounded in her knowledge of the twofold nature of dreams:

> doiai; gavr te puvlai ajmenhnw`n eijsi;n ojneivrwn:
> aiJ me;n ga;r keravessi teteuvcatai, aiJ d' ejlevfanti:
> tw`n oi} mevn k' evjlqwsi dia; pristou` ejlevfanto",
> oiJv rJ' ejlefaivrontai, ejvpe' ajkravanta fevronte":
> oi} de; dia; xestw`n keravwn ejvlqwsi quvraze,
> oiJv rJ' evjtuma kraivnousi, brotw`n ovJte kevn ti" ijvdhtai.[1]

This part of Penelope's speech is one of the first known attempts in Western literature to divide dreams into categories, and the division, like many others after it, is based on the truthfulness or lack thereof of dreams and their possible connection with actual events in the dreamer's conscious life. It does not take into consideration the nature of dreams *per se*, that is to say, the nature and mode of their appearance. Even the word ejvpe' (ejvpo", meaning 'word' or 'voice') does not seem to be particularly suggestive as to the way in which the dream appears to the dreamer, although the Greek phrase for dreaming, ejnuvpnion oJra~n, is suggestive of a visual experience rather than an aural one. It might be interesting to observe that, while another Greek writer, Plato, echoes Homer's lines with no substantial change of meaning, there is a possibly significant difference in the handling of the same theme on the part of a Latin author. Here is the version proposed by Virgil:

> Sunt geminae Somni portae; quarum altera fertur
> cornea, qua veris facilis datur exitus umbris,
> altera candenti perfecta nitens elephanto,
> sed falsa ad caelum mittunt insomnia manes.[2]

It is undisputable that now the dream, no more an 'empty voice', is establishing a more precise relationship with the world of spirits and apparitions, the semi-divine area from which *Manes* come.

[°] I wish to thank here Michael Evans, of the Warburg Institute, for his generous help.

[1] 'Two in fact are the doors of insubstantial dreams; one is made of horn, the other of ivory; the dreams coming out of polished ivory delude with empty words [voices]; those coming out through polished horn bring to effect true things, when one of the mortals sees them.' Homer, *Odyssey*, XIX. 562-567. See also Plato, *Charmides*, 173a.

[2] 'Double are the doors of Sleep. Of these one is said to be made of horn, and through it an easy exit is given to true shadows; the other, polished one, shines with clear ivory, but (through it) the Manes send deceitful dreams to the heaven'. Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI, 893-896. See also Horace, *Odes*, III, 27, 40-43.

It is among the Virgilian *umbrae* that nightmares may find their rightful place. Yet for this particular type of dream there is no word in Latin, and when Macrobius outlines his scheme on the five species of dreams he will have to recur to the Greek word ejpiavlte", and ascribe it to the category of the favntasma or *visum* -- the apparition, or, according to W.H. Stahl's translation, the 'incubus'. There is a recurring confusion among readers and scholars of Macrobius in their handling of the two terms *insomnium* and *visum* and their relationship with the incubus. Some scholars[3] link the *insomnium* to the English word 'nightmare'. Most of this confusion, however, has to do with the confusion between the nightmare as a troubled dream and the nightmare as an apparition, a nocturnal creature with an existence of its own. In fact, the main difficulty in analyzing the appearance of incubi in middle-English literature is that their nature oscillates between these two poles: for the most part, they belong to the world of apparitions, more or less closely associated with demons or devils, but the peculiar timing and nature of their visitations is a continual reminder of their belonging to this other world. This very difficulty may constitute, on the other hand, a stimulus to analyze the ways some late medieval English writers deal with this phenomenon.

Before turning to the literary aspects of this study, it is necessary to know exactly what we are dealing with, and to get rid of a few misconceptions about 'incubus' and 'nightmare', both as words and as physiological phenomena. I will also try to draw as clearly as possible a map of related medieval beliefs.

In spite of their different origin, the two words are not separated by any clear-cut boundary of meaning. Generally speaking, with *incubus* we refer to a demonic apparition, or even a devil *tout court*, while *nightmare* covers the oneiric and pathological aspects of this phenomenon. However, the terms are often interchangeable, and in some European languages only one term is used: for instance, the Italian *incubo*, the Portuguese *pesadelo*, or the modern Greek ejpiavlte". It is necessary therefore to clear a few doubts -- clearing them all would be impossible -- concerning the origins and semantic areas to which the two words used in English refer.

The Old English *mære* is the root of *nightmare*. The same word, with small variations, is to be found in other Germanic languages (for instance, the Old German *mar* or *mare*, the Old Norse *mara*, the Old Irish *mar* or *mor*), and signifies a night monster. It is by a bizarre coincidence that the second half of the word *nightmare* has been associated with *mare*, a female horse.[4] As a night monster the *mære* makes an

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[3] Alison M. Peden , 'Macrobius and Mediaeval Dream Literature', *Medium Aevum* 54 (1985), p. 60. See also A.C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 9.

[4] It might be interesting to determine whether this coincidence lies behind the frequency of horse-images associated with the nightmare. Fuseli's famous painting is only one of the best-known instances, but see also a famous song from *King Lear*, III, iv: "Swithold footed thrice the old; / He met the night-mare, and her nine-fold; / Bid her alight, / And her troth plight, / And aroint thee, witch, aroint thee!". In his Arden edition of *Lear*, Kenneth Muir maintains

early apparition in Celtic and early Germanic folklore. It is probably with this meaning, and with reference to the monster Grendel, that the word *mære* or *mæra* is to be found in *Beowulf* (lines 103 and 762), and it reappears among the Celtic fairies as Morrigan or Morrìgain, a female demon or even the queen of demons, part of a trinity to which the inscription *lamiis tribus* found in a Romano-Celtic temple in Benwell seems to refer.[5] To the same word are related the French *cauchemar* , and the German *Nachtmar*.

As for *incubus*, the etymology is less difficult. The late Latin *incubus* ('a being lying on a sleeper') derives from **incubere*, from which derive the two verbs *incubare* ('to lie on') and *incumbere* ('oppress'). The explanation is provided by Isidore of Seville: '*Incubi* dicuntur ab *incumbendo*, hoc est, *stuprando*'.[6] The idea of oppression, obviously, maintains the ambiguity of meaning of the word *incubus*, denoting both a demonic assailant and the physiological feeling of suffocation associated with the nightmare. Besides, *incubus* as a night monster is associated with *succubus*, related in its turn to *succuba* ('concubine') and the verb *succubare* ('to lie under'), and used to indicate the female correspondent of the demon incubus.

Not surprisingly, nightmares receive the attention of psychoanalysts rather than of literary critics. In fact, the only literary study on the subject with any claim to thoroughness is, as far as I am aware, Nicolas Kiessling's *The Incubus in English Literature*,[7] which attempted the herculean task of describing such occurrences in English literature from *Beowulf* to Byron and after. The result, in spite of a few illuminating passages, tends to be more a farrago than a catalogue, and has very little claim to critical depth. On the side of the psychoanalists, there is more awareness of the importance of the problem than actual attempts to examine it.[8] A more specific contribution comes from Ernest Jones, in his essay *On the Nightmare*, and it is surprising to observe how the symptoms he notes as typical of nightmares[9] had already been noted and described by some medieval authors, and had been made the object of special attention on the part of those who did not concern themselves with the

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that the word *mare* in this context "has no connection with the word meaning a female horse" (p. 116). The similarity, however, might have appeared suggestive to Shakespeare.

[5] See J. Vendryes, *Lexique Etymologique de l'Irlandais Ancien*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983, p. 64. In Irish folklore, Morrigan or Morrigu is the goddess of war, death, and slaughter, and embodies the perverse part of supernatural powers. For the interpretation of the word *mære* in *Beowulf*, see Kiessling, p. 17.

[6] Isidore of Seville, 'Etymologiarum Libri XX', VIII, 103, in *Sancti Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Opera Omnia*, ed. J.P. Migne, Patrologia Latina, Paris: Migne, 1850, p. 326.

[7] Nicolas Kiessling, *The Incubus in English Literature: Provenance and Progeny*, Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1977.

[8] John E. Mack has suggested in rather forceful fashion the importance of dreams for writers, and particularly the usefulness of nightmares, their 'unique value in conveying the conflict over murderous impulses and primitive sexuality and in capturing an individual's feeling of helplessness …'. See *Nightmares and Human Conflict*, Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1970, pp. 85-86.

[9] '1) Agonizing dread; 2) sense of oppression or weight at the chest which alarmingly interferes with respiration; 3) conviction of helpless paralysis'. Ernest Jones, *On the Nightmare*, London: Hogarth Press, 1931, p. 20.

supernatural origin of the nightmare and preferred to dwell on physical causes. Such an author is John of Salisbury (1110-80), who describes the

> ephialtem, quo quis variis pressuris quodam quasi intervigilio, sed somnio potius inquieto, opinans se vigilare cum dormiat, putatur ab aliquo interim praegravari.[10]

With the last sentence he has already established the link between the feeling of oppression and the (according to him, false) impression of the presence of some Being. In his opinion, this feeling belongs exclusively to the realm of dreams, and finds an origin in the physical conditions of the sleeper rather than in some transcendental presence. Quite a few medieval authors seem to agree with him in this rejection of supernatural causes : twelfth-century glossed manuscripts of Macrobius' *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* agreed with the Chartrian philosopher William of Conches in providing a complete scientific explanation, attributing the feeling of oppression to the pressure of the 'anterior cells of the brain on the rear ones when the sleeper is supine, or the pressure of the liver, gall bladder and stomach on the heart when he is lying on his left side'.[11] Correspondingly, we have a number of remedies suggested for what is considered nothing more than an alteration of the body.

It is in this interpretation that the incubus is closer to the Macrobian *visum* and *insomnium*, since Macrobius, too, deemed it necessary to produce physical and terrestrial causes for these dreams in order to demonstrate their untruthfulness. The variations presented by the different authors would be more interesting for a study of the fluctuations of medical opinions on humours and the perfect equilibrium of the human body -- Boethius of Dacia in his *De Somniis*, for instance, writes of 'fumi colerici rubei et combusti' and 'fumi nigri terrestres'.[12] It is difficult to reconstruct a pattern or even a line of development in these positions. In some cases, moreover, the physiological explanation coexists with the metaphysical one: this is what happens with Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), who in *Causae et Curae* writes

> Multotiens autem cum homo dormit, sanguis, qui in eo est, de igne medullae eius fortiter ardet, et sic de calore sanguinis aqua, quae in sanguine est, exsiccatur. Et tunc etiam diabolica ars, quae est in prima suggestione primae coagulationis, cum homo concipitur, se aliquando permissione dei sursum erigit et tempestatem circa hominem facit pavorem ei in somnis incutiendo, se videlicet per oppressionem fantasiae ostendendo velut ibi sit.[13]

The different opinions we have quoted here, though springing from the same search for natural causes, do seem, in fact, to represent a series of isolated cases. Yet, in

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[10] 'The nightmare, because of which whoever is under pressure and in a sort of sleeplessness or rather in a restless sleep, believing to be awake when he is in fact sleeping, thinks he is oppressed by something'. 'Polycraticus' book II, c. 15, in *Joannis Cognomine Saresberiensis Carnotensis Episcopi Opera Omnia*, ed. J.P. Migne, Patrologia Latina, Paris: Garnier-Migne, 1900, p. 429.

[11] Alison M. Peden, 'Macrobius and Mediaeval Dream Literature', *Medium Aevum* 54 (1985), p. 64.

[12] Boethius of Dacia, 'De Somniis', in *Boethii Dacii Opera. Topica - Opuscula*, ed. Nicolaus Georgius Green-Pedersen, Copenhagen: GAD, 1976, p. 388.

[13] 'Many times, when the man is sleeping, the blood in him burns vigorously of the fire of his pith, and so the water in the blood is desiccated by the heat of the blood. And then the devil's art, which was in the first instance of the first coagulation, when the man was being conceived, sometimes excites itself by divine permission and storms around the man frightening him in dreams, that is to say showing itself through the oppression of imagination as if it were really there'. *Hildegardis Causae et Curae*, ed. Paul Kaiser, Leipzig: Teubner, 1903, p. 142.

partial confutation to this theory, we can also state that in the centuries after the Protestant Reformation the new variations on this position, disproving (whether explicitly or not) the theory of a supernatural origin for nightmare apparitions, were for the most part charged with irony or even sarcasm against the positions of past Church Fathers or contemporary ecclesiastical authorities who supported this belief, and were therefore organized in a more systematic manner.[14]

The empirical view on the matter is counterbalanced by a steady input of writings supporting or demonstrating the demonic origin of the nightmare and its close relationship with the *Incubo Demonio*. Correspondingly, the 'metaphysical' theory is accompanied by a subtler and more complicated casuistry, often straying from the limits imposed by this research. It is my intention here to give an account only of the most significant contributions, in the context of late medieval culture in England.

In our etymological discussion we have seen how the dividing line between nightmare and incubus is in fact very thin, and how both terms have at their root a word indicating a night monster. Originally, in fact, the incubus was confused with a series of nightly creatures deriving from the most disparate cultures -- wood demons, fairies, wild men. The confusion can be readily explained if we consider the modes and range of the process of christianization taking place throughout Europe in the High Middle Ages. Non-Christian gods tended to be equalized with Christian devils, and the lower deities soon found a place in the demonic hierarchy that was rapidly being formed. This identification is accompanied by a lowering of status: fairies or other supernatural beings associated with natural phenomena took on a negative connotation, combining in themselves as they did the symbolism of natural (non-human, and often inexplicable) forces with the Pagan symbolism. The very lack of information about these beings brought Christian proselytizers to a generic condemnation of them.

In Great Britain, as well as in other northern European countries, we have numerous examples of this process, and Celtic fairies and other supernatural beings were grouped under a common denomination that was part of the formation of the concept of incubus. The confusion, obviously, was not limited solely to the Morrigan mentioned above -- the very terminology tends to include a rather vast category, from the *lamia* to the *pilosi* or wild men.[15] Most of this confusion arises from the limits imposed by the process of translation; a good instance of this homologation of beings coming from different cultures is Robert Burton when he writes 'For as he said in *Lucian* after such conference, *Hecatas somniare mihi videor*, I can thinke of nothing but

[14] A clear instance is book IV of Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, ed. Brisley Nicholson, London: Elliot Stock, 1886, pp. 58-70.

[15] Richard Bernheimer has traced this confusion back to St. Jerome's translation of the Bible: 'to St. Jerome all these creatures were unclean spirits and their sexual proclivities only an exaggeration of that pagan immorality which he condemned on all counts'. See *Wild Men in the Middle Ages: A Study in Art, Sentiment and Demonology*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952, p. 97.

Hobgoblins'.[16] But Burton's example is unusual insofar as it draws its source from a classical example, while generally the reference is to Medieval *auctoritates*, from Isidore of Seville to the Church Fathers. An eleventh-century Welsh manuscript of Macrobius' *Commentary*, for instance, glosses the word ejpiavlte" with 'incubus' and then adds an explanation on the origin of incubi:

> Tria sunt genera quae a tribus pastoribus latini regis processerant, qui cum in herimo pascerent greges, contigit eis cum peccoribus concumbere. Hinc et animalia multa ex alterutra uicissim forma ediderunt confusa. Et haec sunt nomina trium pastorum id est: Faunus, Saturus, Incubus. Et qui procederunt de illorum stirpe nominantur fauni, saturi, incubi. Fauni a fando; saturi a saturando; incubi ab incubando, quia in somnis occupant homines.[17]

Here we can witness a rather charming example of confusion between the nightmare as a form of dream, and not a particularly highly-rated one, and the semi-human Incubus. But even in later times, as Bartholomaeus Anglicus' *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (end of the fourteenth century) shows, the confusion persists. Bartholomaeus draws his source from Isidore of Seville, and beside linking incubi with Fauni and Satiri he finds new synonyms, such as *Inuii* and *Demones Galliducij*.[18]

It might be advisable at this point to step back for a moment and see the sources from which this idea of the supernatural origin of the incubus is derived. The first author who makes the connection between incubi and evil forces with a considerable authority is St. Augustine, who mentions incubi in at least two texts -- *De Civitate Dei* and *De Trinitate*. In *De Civitate Dei* he perpetuates the terminological confusion writing about 'Silvanos, et Faunos, quos vulgo incubos vocant, … et quosdam daemones, quos Dusios Galli nuncupant',[19] while in *De Trinitate* he deals with an aspect that shall thereafter receive particular attention on the part of the Church: the possibility that incubi might copulate with human beings and eventually conceive children. It is this possibility of entertaining sexual relationships with human beings, and especially with women, that intrigues most of the writers taken into consideration and becomes the centre of the debate on incubi. The possibility opens a series of new questions: whether, for instance, women lying with incubi are to be considered witches, or whether the devil would prefer categories of women traditionally associated with purity, such as nuns and young virgins; whether children of incubi are generated with the devil's semen or not, and therefore, if the first alternative is true, whether these offspring could still be considered human beings, or if the second alternative is

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[16] Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. T.C. Faulkner *et al.*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989-90, p. 98.

[17] 'Three are the species deriving from the Latin king's three shepherds, who, while tending the flock in a desert place, happened to lie with their sheep. Hence they gave birth to many animals of mingled origin. And these are the names of the three shepherds, that is to say, Faunus, Saturus, and Incubus. And those descending from their race are called *fauni*, *saturi*, and *incubi*. *Fauni* from "uttering"; *saturi* from "satiating"; and *incubi* from "lying upon", because they fall upon people in their sleep'. See Alison M. Peden, 'Science and Philosophy in Wales at the Time of the Norman Conquest: A Macrobius Manuscript from Llanbadarn', *Cambridge Mediaeval Celtic Studies* 2 (1981), p. 35.

[18] Stephen Bateman, *Batman uppon Bartholome his Booke De Proprietatibus Rerum*, London: Imprinted by Thomas East, 1582, lib. XVIII c. 48 'De Faunis & Satiris', and c. 84, 'De Pilosis'.

[19] Book XV, c. 23: '*Silvani* and *Fauni*, commonly called *incubi*, and those demons called by the Gauls *Dusii*'.

accepted, where does the devil get the semen. This particular problem is discussed also by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica* (I, q. 51, a. 3, 6). Both philosophers reach the same conclusion: the devil disguises itself as a succubus and ravishes a man in his sleep. Having obtained the semen from the man, the succubus transforms itself into an incubus and uses the semen to rape a woman. Therefore any child conceived by this union would be a descendant of human beings, but the means of conception would be diabolical.

These new fields of enquiry with which most writers following St. Augustine or other Church Fathers concern themselves, contribute to consign the incubi motif to the world of Satanism, and separate it from its non-Christian origins. When Richard Bernheimer, in his *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*, writes that 'inquisitor and scholastic combined thus in severing incubus lore from the lore of the wood demon and replacing the former by organized Satanism' (p. 101), he shows great perception, but tends to confuse the issue, especially from a chronological point of view. Scholastic philosophers systematize the incubus lore and insert it within Christian theology -- it is to their contribution, for instance, that we owe the division of these demons into two kinds, the male incubus and the female succubus. They also impress on the matter the stamp of their authority, and effectively condition any subsequent treatment, particularly on the part of Catholic authors. The eighteenth-century writer Louis Sinistrari, for instance, dares disagree with the Augustinian-Thomistic view of the origin of the semen used by incubi, but does so only 'sub correctione Sanctae Matris Ecclesiae, et mere opinative'.[20] The same meek tone seems to be used by most of his contemporaries, as well as by earlier writers such as Jean Bodin and Ambroise Paré. What Counter-Reformation writers do, on the other side, is rather to repeat and reinforce the 'scholastic' opinion by bringing in a large number of practical examples and moral tales. In a way, they revisit the whole matter bringing it down from the theological sphere and into the more practical world of Inquisition and witch-trials. The most important example in this sense is doubtlessly the *Malleus Maleficarum*, written by Jacobus Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer in 1486 as a sort of practical handbook for the inquisitions of the newly-born Holy Office. In the book, probably the most famous on witchcraft and demonology, the two priors examine the problem of incubi visitations taking into consideration every possible case, in almost fascinated detail. They use the authority of Augustine and other Church Fathers, along with Aristotle and the Bible, to prove every point of their thesis, and this can justify our supposition that 'scholastic' and counter-reformistic theories complement each other -- the Church Fathers giving the necessary authority, and the later writers providing examples for each occurrence.

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[20] 'Under correction of the Holy Mother Church, and merely as an opinion'. Louis Marie Sinistrari D'Ameno, *De la Démonialité et des Animaux Incubes et Succubes*, Paris: Isidore Lisieux, 1875, p. 60.

All this, however, does not explain to us the position of writers who were at the time not directly touched by the Counter-Reformation, such as the English ones. We shall analyze some instance in detail below, but it is still worthwhile to mention here an instance of the post-Reformation contribution to demonology that comes from an Anglican area. It is the *Daemonologie*, written in 1586 by the future king James I of England. James was at that time twenty years old and still living in Scotland, so we should not consider this book as representative of his religious position as king of England. It is nevertheless striking that his opinion on incubi coincides perfectly with the Augustinian-Thomistic one. James goes as far as to suggest the possible mechanics of semen-transportation on the part of the demons during their transformation from succubi to incubi. On the other side, he distinguishes these diabolical visitations from 'the thing which we cal the *Mare*'. The latter is

> but a naturall sicknes, which the Medicines hath giuen the name of *Incubus* unto ab *Incubando*, because it being a thick fleume, falling unto our breast upon the harte, while we are sleeping, intercludes so our vital spirites, and takes all power from vs, as makes vs think that there were some vnnaturall burden or spirite, lying upon vs and holding vs downe.[21]

From this sketch of medieval and post-medieval beliefs on incubi, one conclusion at least may be drawn: both Catholic and non-Catholic writers were deeply influenced by the systematization brought about by the church, which disposed of the incubus lore transforming it, to quote Bernheimer once again, into organized Satanism. If there is a difference between the two religious creeds, it is in the fact that the Protestant reserved for itself the right to criticize this systematization and re-connect incubi to medical or scientific explanations, or to dream-theories. It is this second link I shall try to investigate now.

Macrobius' division of dreams into categories, based in its turn upon Artemidorus' *Oneirocriticon*, had considerable influence throughout the Middle Ages, and can be taken as the starting point for our discussion on the place of nightmares among dreams. Nightmares were assigned, however, a very low place, being only a subcategory of the last group:

> favntasma vero, hoc est visum, cum inter vigiliam et adultam quietem in quadam, ut aiunt, prima somni nebula adhuc se vigilare aestimans, qui dormire vix coepit, aspicere videtur irruentes in se vel passim vagantes formas a natura seu magnitudine seu specie discrepantes variasque tempestates rerum vel laetas vel turbulentas. in hoc genere est et ejpiavlte" quem publica persuasio quiescentes opinatur invadere, et pondere suo pressos ac sentientes gravare.[22]

In this, as in all medieval attempts to systematize dreams, nightmares seem to occupy a low place, since their link with daily experiences removes the possibility of a

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[21] *Daemonologie, in Forme of a Dialogue*, Edinburgh: Printed by Robert Walde-Graue, 1597, p. 69.

[22] Macrobius, *Commento al Somnium Scipionis*, ed. Mario Regali, Pisa: Giardini, 1983, I, 7, p. 48. 'The apparition (*phantasma* or *visum*) comes upon one in the moment between wakefulness and slumber, in the so-called "first cloud of sleep." In this drowsy condition he thinks he is still fully awake and imagines he sees specters rushing at him or wandering vaguely about, differing from natural creatures in size and shape, and hosts of diverse things, either delightful or disturbing. To this class belongs the incubus, which, according to popular belief, rushes upon people in sleep and presses them with a weight which they can feel.' Translation by William Harris Stahl, New York: Columbia University Press, 1952, p. 89.

connection with divine truth. In the divisions that take into account the threefold nature of vision, that is to say, *intellectualis*, *spiritualis*, and *corporalis*, the nightmare is obviously a product of the third, and once again this implies a dependence on daily events and sentiments that has little or nothing to do with a supra-natural revelation. Incidentally, it is only to this last and least interesting (from a medieval point of view) category that psychoanalysis shall turn its attention, as the one that can give us more clues on the individual dreamer. To explain the medieval indifference to the relationship that can be established between the dream and the dreamer, it might be useful to look at their concept of authorship, at the lack of interest displayed towards the author of a work (even by the author himself) as opposed to the amount of interest the work could raise. J.A. Burrow expresses this idea with admirable brevity when he writes 'what requires explanation here is not the fact that some Middle English pieces are anonymous, but the fact that others are not'.[23] This attitude is possibly analogous to the one we have observed in the medieval attention towards the phenomenon of dreams. Dreams, if truthful and therefore significant, are *sent*. The receiver is not unimportant, but secondary, or passive, and thus dreams that are only a reflection of the dreamer's waking life cannot reveal much. In the tripartite division the first two categories, *intellectualis* and *spiritualis*, are significant for their opening towards a word existing outside the dreamer. The third dream, *corporalis*, has existence only within the limits, even physical, of the individual. Besides, it depends on external circumstances, such as thirst, or fright, whose accidentality precludes relevance.

On the other hand, we can find texts contradicting this explanation, and attributing to nightmares a non-human, or non-physical, origin. One of the dream theories, proposed by Alain de Lille, is a variation on the tripartite division theme in which, perhaps to maintain a symmetry of structure, the nightmare finds an extra-human derivation:

> Triplex est somnus … Tertius somnus est quando dormit ratio, et sensualitas exorbitat. Primus somnus fit supra hominem; secundus secundum hominem; tertius infra hominem. Primus miraculosus, secundus imaginarius, tertius monstrosus.[24]

Unfortunately Alain does not dwell on this 'monstruous' quality of the dream, and does not tell us anything about its origin. But the 'infra hominem' qualification is suggestive of a closer relationship with the forces generating the monster incubus. There is in fact a curious interchangeability between these two phenomena, which we first noticed when examining the lexical aspects, but which is evident also in other forms. If we remain within the Macrobian text, for instance, the most striking analogy is the one regarding the feeling of oppression. When writing about the *visum*, in fact, Macrobius makes use of verbs such as *irruentes*, *invadere*, and *gravare*. The studies of modern

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[23] J.A. Burrow, *Medieval Writers and Their Work*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, p.36.

[24] Alain de Lille, 'Summa de Arte Praedicatoria', in *Alani de Insulis ... Opera Omnia*, ed. J.P. Migne, Patrologia Latina, Paris: Migne, 1855, pp. 195-196.

psychoanalysis, describing the sensations of lung paralysis accompanying the nightmare experience, confirm us in what medieval writers already knew -- how near the *nocturna oppressio* of nightmare is to the *monstruosa invasio* of the demon incubus. In this case, the sensation is purely physical. There is also, however, a hallucinogenic quality to the nightmare, better expressed by the word favntasma, once again used by Macrobius. Most of the medieval descriptions, in fact, even those concerned solely with the dream and its physical causes, tend to dwell on the frightening and oddly fascinating imagery involved. We range from the 'species tremendas' of Prudentius' *Liber Cathemerinon* (VI, 56) to the 'yrcocervos, onocentauros, chimeras ac alia monstruosa corpora' of Pascalis Romanus' *Liber Thesauri Occulti* (I, 3), while a pseudo-Augustinian text, the *Liber de spiritu et anima*, goes as far as to suggest interesting variations on the quality of the images appearing to the sleeper, since according to the humours dominant in each individual some are granted visions in colour, while others have to be content with black-and-white.[25] These hallucinations, in their different forms, seem to have a lot in common with the nocturnal visitations of the Catholic tradition, and, if accompanied by the feelings of oppression mentioned above, give to the nightmare the disturbing quality of 'presence', of an existence that can naturally be supposed to be independent from the dreamer and his/her waking experiences.

In spite of the similarities sketched here, the possibility of a link between incubus and nightmare seems, more often than not, to have been neglected by scholars. There is, however, one book recently published by Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in The Middle Ages*, where the issue is dealt with, and where the author makes a number of striking observations. He notices, first of all, that Macrobius renounces the bipolar opposition proposed by the homeric image of the two doors and substitutes it with a gradation from the immanent to the transcendent. He then works on the distinction between the two 'lowest' forms of dream, the *visum* and the *insomnium*, and the conclusions he reaches are rather similar to ours:

> Like the *insomnium*, the *visum* deceives, but it does so in a less solipsistic -- and therefore potentially "higher" -- way. Occurring "in the moment between wakefulness and slumber" (I.iii.7), it does not, like the *insomnium*, originate solely from an immersion in individual physical and psychological process; instead it also involves a movement (however slight) beyond the confines of the self … In the *visum*, the dreamer perceives "spectres" and *incubi* that at least seem to exist externally. Yet, of course, this dream arises from "imagination," from a misconstruction of reality; it remains self-delusive. Still, the *visum* begins to move beyond the self, suggesting, if only faintly, the transcendence of the purely mundane -- the contact with a spiritual (spectral) realm -- that will characterize higher, revelatory dreams.[26]

The theoretical leap in the last few lines allows the confirmation of the existence of a gradation from the immanent to the transcendent, and sees in the *visum* a higher form of dream than the *insomnium*. Yet it still is a theoretical leap, suffering from two

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[25] 'Alia namque vident sanguinei, alia cholerici, alia phlegmatici, alia melancholici. Illi vident rubea et varia; isti, nigra et alba'. *Liber de spiritu et anima*, c. 25, in *Sancti Aurelii Augustini ... Opera Omnia. Tomus Sextus*, ed. J.P. Migne, Patrologia Latina, Paris: Migne, 1887, p. 798.

[26] Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 22.

major faults: the sole reliance on Macrobius, without support from any other text, and the confusion between 'spiritual' and 'spectral'. If we consider the already quoted passage from Alain de Lille, we can interpret the 'infra hominem' as a demonic realm from which nightmares find their origin -- at any rate, the word 'spectral', as used by Kruger, is possibly too vague to be adequately supported. There is, indeed, a liminal quality to the *visum* that distinguishes it from the *insomnium*, but in my opinion it should be expressed differently. It is hard to determine the 'confines of the self' in the medieval dream experience, but there is another threshold delineated more than once in the texts taken into consideration: the one which divides sleep from the waking condition. On this threshold nightmare often finds its most obvious placement, and the very ambiguity of this position finds a correspondent in the ambiguity surrounding nocturnal apparitions as described by medieval writers. It is the creative experience prompted by nightmares rather than their psychological analysis that can be of interest in the present study. And there certainly is no doubt that the liminal quality we have tried to describe and demonstrate in this chapter is particularly suggestive in the literary treatment of this phenomenon.[27]

Examples in Middle-English literature

As is to be expected, with most of the examples we can find in Middle-English literature the incubus is the result of the encounter of Celtic lore with pre-Reformation dogma. A charming example of this confusion of cultural traditions is a line in William Dunbar's 'The Goldyn Targe', where there is a thrice-referential invocation to 'Pluto, the elrich incubus'.[28] Wood demons and other creatures often associated with natural forces, carrying both positive and negative connotations, are assimilated to the hell-originated and unescapably evil *Incubo Demonio*. An attempt at systematic taxonomy has already been made by Nicolas Kiessling in his *The Incubus in English Literature* (ch. 6 and 7). Therefore it might be more interesting to examine the status of the incubus, his position between a demonic apparition, a true dream, an object of lewd jokes and a simple figment of the imagination, and take into consideration some significant single instances rather than attempt to classify them all.

In the first chapter we saw a very early instance of the use of the word *mære*, in *Beowulf*, where it already had the meaning of 'monster'. What I am more interested in, however, is the later use of this concept, after the influence of the Augustinian-Thomistic interpretation began to be felt and writers dealing with the theme of nightmares had to take into account the demonic associations brought in by

[27] See John E. Mack, *Nightmares and Human Conflict*, Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1970, p. 85-86.

[28] 'Pluto, the elf-like incubus'. In *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. James Kinsley, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, p. 33, line 125.

Christianity. I have not been able to find texts exclusively devoted to this phenomenon, with the possible exception of John Gower's 'Tale of Nectanabus' in the *Confessio Amantis*, which I shall discuss separately; nor are there texts, as far as I am aware, where the nightmare is accorded the same treatment, in length or importance, as 'true' dreams. Yet there are numerous marginal or indirect references to it, and the first overall impression one gets is that Middle-English authors seem to be aware of the narrowness of the dividing line between incubi and nightmares, as well as of the close relationship between incubi and pre-Christian demons. I am speaking mainly of poets here, or at any rate of writers who do not consider the phenomenon from a didactic point of view. There are works such as the so-called *Early South-English Legendary*, or the moralizing dialogue *Dives and Pauper*, where the treatment remains faithful to the dictates of the church, and tends to reassure the reader by circumscribing the range and significance of the fiend visitation rather than evoking further frightful visions or fading the outlines of the demonic figures by associating them with human 'fancy's images'. In *Dives and Pauper* the *incubi* and their female counterpart *succuby* are simply 'the fendis that temptyn folc to lecherie',[29] and the explanation on their behaviour is strictly Augustinian. The *Legendary*, on the other hand, introduces a variation by attributing to evil angels the power not only to beget offspring with women, but also to send nightmares.[30] Without deviating from the given interpretation, this text confirms, if not the identity, the kinship between evil angels and evil dreams. The kinship is based on a common background -- the night atmosphere -- and on the quality of apparition, of *imago* sent by a being of a nature superior to mankind, that the two phenomena share.

One sign of the relative increase of the presence of incubi in Middle-English literature in comparison with, for instance, the French or Italian literary tradition, can be found in texts which are based on Continental models. The introduction of incubi, with their contour of *Silvani* and wild men, is more often than not an innovation on the part of the English writer. We have a relevant example in Lydgate's *Troy Book* (II, 7701-02), where the mention of 'Satiry, Bycornys eke, fawny and incuby' does not depend on a corresponding reference in Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae*. Keeping in mind the fact that incubi and nightmares constitute a marginal theme in Middle-English literature, and can by no means aspire to the attention due to dreams of the prophetic or revelatory type, we can nevertheless maintain that their treatment in England strikes an individual and possibly a new note, that distinguishes it from their treatment in Continental literatures. It is not only what we can call, perhaps inaccurately, synchretism between Christian culture and the indigenous (or at least the

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[29] *Dives and Pauper*, ed. Priscilla Heath Barnum, London: Oxford University Press, 1976-78, p. 118.
[30] *The Early South-English Legendary, Or Lives of Saints*, ed. Carl Horstmann, London: Trübner, 1887, p. 306.

pre-existing) ones. The imaginary nocturnal landscape of the Middle-English writer seems to be populated with a semi-human race with which he is more familiar than his French or Italian colleague, and for whose loss, after the process of Christianization, he seems to feel a certain regret. Geoffrey Chaucer, who was himself, according to the Host of the *Canterbury Tales*, 'elvyssh by his contenaunce' (VII, 703), offers us an instance of this feeling. It occurs at the beginning of the Wife of Bath's Tale and, while poking some fun at the expense of contemporary friars, it also supplies an adequate introduction to the Arthurian folk-tale that is being presented and to its legendary overtones. The passage is worth quoting extensively:

> In th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,
> Of which that Britons speken greet honour,
> Al was this land fulfild of fayerye.
> The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,
> Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede.
> This was the olde opinion, as I rede;
> I speke of manye hundred yeres ago.
> But now kan no man se none elves mo,
> For now the grete charitee and prayeres
> Of lymytours and othere hooly freres,
> That serchen every lond and every streem,
> As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,
> Blessynge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,
> Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,
> Thropes, bernes, shipnes, dayeryes --
> This maketh that ther ben no fayeryes.
> For ther as wont to walken was an elf
> Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself
> In undermeles and in morwenynges,
> And seyth his matyns and his hooly thynges
> As he gooth in his lymytacioun.
> Wommen may go saufly up and doun.
> In every bussh or under every tree
> Ther is noon oother incubus but he,
> And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.
>
> (857-881)

Since this is the Wife of Bath speaking, the reader tends to underline the straightforwardness and salacity of her attack against the hypocritical 'lymytour', sometimes at the expense of the other themes of this speech. George Kittredge concentrated on the notion of the disappearance of incubi, and considered these lines 'mythologically significant, for they mark the passage of the old Teutonic belief in elves or trolls or hillmen that woo or abduct mortal women into the theological conception that explains all such creatures as devils'.[31] The mention of the incubus -- the only one in Chaucer -- has also been an object of debate, since it seemed to refer to the procreating power these beings have. Nicolas Kiessling has devoted an entire chapter of his book to this line, pointing out that there really does not seem to be cause for much controversy here, nor should we see more bawdiness than there is meant to be in the

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[31] George L. Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929, p. 119.

Wife of Bath's remarks. He concludes by writing that 'in this relatively minor passage Chaucer utilized underworld creatures for a purely comic effect, a practice which became increasingly popular' (p. 54). But an altogether different tone is noticeable in the speech we have quoted, and intervenes in the pauses of her attack: it is a dreaming and somewhat nostalgic representation of the 'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour', evocative and strange, as unexpected on her lips as the 'Queen Mab' speech is on Mercutio's. It is also one of the few occasions in which we find this kind of tone associated with the incubus. Other Chaucerian references to nocturnal apparitions take place in widely different contexts, and are perhaps less revealing. Thus, for instance, the quest of the elf-queene in 'Sir Thopas' (VII, 786-796), although described as an apparition in a dream, must be understood within the burlesque context of the tale. But one of the dreams in *Troilus and Criseyde*, on the other hand, seems to approach that dividing line we had tried to define in chapter 2.[32] It is Troilus' first dream, in Book V, and it takes place shortly after the protagonist has been separated from Criseyde (lines 246-251). This dream definitely belongs to the category of nightmares, and does not involve any apparition of the incubus type. Yet the poet lists all the psychological symptoms we have learned to associate with the nightmare experience (248-259), and at the same time he describes these symptoms as the result of a vision or 'fantasie' (261), maintaining, as it were, a deep-rooted ambiguity of meaning. It should also be added that, as in the Lydgate example quoted above, this description is Chaucer's own insertion into a given story and does not appear in what is considered Chaucer's most probable source for this poem, that is to say, Boccaccio's *Filostrato*. Although none of the Chaucerian passages just quoted are distinctly devoted to the subject we are analyzing here, they are both revealing of a certain familiarity with the phenomena of nightmares and incubi, and at the same time they can tell us something about Middle-English writers and their attitudes in this area. The familiarity I have mentioned becomes twofold in the first passage -- the Wife of Bath is not only unimpressed by the presence of incubi, but would seem rather to welcome them, possibly in preference to the ever-present 'lymytours'. We can mention in passing that this mixing of holy and devilish matters in the association of friars with demons is to be found once again in Chaucer, when he makes the Summoner say that 'freres and fendes been but lyte asonder' ('The Summoner's Prologue', III, 1674), and has, this time, a definite antecedent in Boccaccio's *Decameron* IV, 2.[33]

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[32] Walter C. Curry confirms the closeness of incubus and nightmare by asserting that 'such a dream [nightmare] is sometimes popularly interpreted in the Middle Ages as the appearance of demons in sleep, hence Chaucer's prayer to be delivered "Fro fantom and illusioun" (*Fame*, 493), i.e., from horrible apparitions which demons show to sleeping men and from the deceptions which they may practice upon the waking mind'. *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1926, p. 209.

[33] In this *novella* Berto della Massa, who is already pretending to be a friar with the name of Frate Alberto da Imola, appears to a woman at night disguised as the archangel Gabriel in order to seduce her, and is then, by way of

Before passing to other, more specific representations of incubi, it might be worthwhile to mention three religious tales of the English late Middle Ages (two of which as yet unpublished), where incubi play a prominent part. Given the context and the audience that was probably meant for them, these tales have all the didactic immobility of *exempla*, and cannot offer the variations on the accepted interpretation of incubi that we have found, for instance, in Chaucer, but also, at a less daring level, in the *Early South-English Legendary*. I have transcribed the two unpublished tales in the Appendix. The text of the third, from an anonymous thirteenth-century collection of exempla (British Museum, MS Royal 7.D.i), is to be found in an article by Przemyslaw Mroczkowski,[34] and narrates how some *fratres predicatores* (Dominican friars) succeded in making incubi depart from Scotland, where these monsters had been roaming at large, molesting women and playing havoc. The tale is of particular interest in this context, since it proposes once again the link incubus - friar, although this time it is totally devoid of the malicious innuendos we have found in Chaucer. In fact, the anonymous author, while claiming for friars the same ability to expel incubi that the Wife of Bath had alluded to, does so in a tone of admiring approbation. However, the link is otherwise underlined in a rather mysterious passage at the end of the tale. After their expulsion from Scotland, the incubi threaten to be revenged on the friars by infesting their land: 'Ey, quomodo a partibus istis expellimur, ibimus ad partes eorum, qui nos hinc expellunt'. Mroczkowski interprets this line as 'an indirect allusion to a satirical allegation that friars have taken over the functions of the incubi', but this suggestion, though tempting, rests on too thin a basis to be seriously taken into consideration. Yet the incubi's threat confirms the existence of this link between the two groups and, if it were the product of a diffused popular belief, it would allow us to hypothesize the existence of a background on which Chaucer could build the Wife's more salacious allegations. The other two tales present less immediate interest. They come from the same manuscript, and are also reproduced in later manuscripts (see Appendix). The first deals with the assaults of an incubus on a young nun, and is no more than a variation on the 'incubus visitation' theme, as it will be abundantly explored by the *Malleus Maleficarum*. The second, considerably longer, is a somewhat complex story of how an incubus tried to seduce a woman and, having failed, killed both her husband and her son and blinded her. Its interest, if any, lies in some of the details of the incubus' appearance and his subsequent infliction of punishment: thus he first appears to her 'in habitu nobili … in serico quandoque in vestibus deauratis', offering an instance of the deceptiveness that we shall later find, for instance, in the fiendish

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punishment, dressed up as the *uomo salvatico*. The tale thus attributes him three disguises -- the friar, the nocturnal apparition, and the wild man -- that can all be related to the incubus motif.

[34] 'Incubi and Friars', in *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny*, 8 (1961), p.191.

attempts to violate pure knights described by Thomas Malory.[35] When she rejects him, he blinds her ('diabolus oculos insufflavit'), and then, having forced her, he makes her abdomen swell prodigiously ('venter eius vehementer intumescere cepit'). This last occurrence was apparently recognised as one of the incubus' peculiar abilities, since we find it also described in James of Scotland's *Daemonologie* with these words:

> Indeede, it is possible to the craft of the Deuill to make a womans bellie to swel after he hath that way abused her, which he may do, either by steiring up her own humor, or by herbe, as we see beggars daily doe (p. 68).

We can notice how this detail, as well as the description of the blinding that preceeded it, put the incubus in close relation to the notion of a deception operated through the act of seeing, or of believing one's own eyes. Words related to this semantic area, such as 'apparuit', or 'oculos', are frequent, and the whole episode, from the first appearance of the demon as a well-dressed gentleman to his provoking what seems but is not a pregnancy, confirms this impression.

A different sort of experience is the one narrated in John Gower's "Tale of Nectanabus". In this tale we find, once again, the incubus motif inextricably linked with the idea of a visual experience, but suggesting at the same time other directions. The tale comes from the sixth book of the *Confessio Amantis* of John Gower, and the source is the Anglo-Norman *Roman de toute Chevalerie*.[36] It narrates how the king of Egypt and sorcerer Nectanabus, forced to flee from his land and to take refuge in Macedonia, sees Olimpias, wife of the Macedonian king Philip, while she is riding through the town, and falls in love with her. With a subterfuge he is admitted to her presence, and reveals that a god, Amos, is in love with her, and will be her bedfellow. When the queen asks for proof of the truth of this revelation, he sends her a vision of what she supposes to be Amos himself, and the following night appears to her disguised as the god. Afterwards he sends a vision narrating the intercourse between the god and the queen to king Philip, so that the latter shall accept the child born from this encounter, Alexander, as his own. The king's last doubts shall be swept away by a fourth apparition of the sorcerer, this time in full daylight, to the king and queen in a hall of the palace. The second part of the tale concerns Alexander's semi-accidental killing of Nectanabus, who is thus punished for his sinful use of the magic art.

The incubus visitation here has been extraordinarily complicated and multiplied by four, in a way that may seem unnecessary. The first of the apparitions to the queen, for instance, could be superfluous, but it helps to mark a gradual passage between the dream of the first night -- an experience completely devoid of substantial reality -- and

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[35] See Thomas Malory, *Works*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948, vol. II, pp. 915-920, and pp. 964-968.

[36] John Gower, 'Confessio Amantis', in *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G.C. MacCaulay, London: Kegan Paul, 1901, pp. 215-30. Thomas of Kent, *The Anglo-Norman Alexander (Le Roman de toute Chevalerie)*, ed. Brian Foster, London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1976, pp. 8-19.

the second night, where the encounter between Olimpias and the magician actually takes place. Gower is treading on very delicate ground, half-way between the magic, the supernatural, and the simply deceitful. He is also exploring that dividing line between nightmares and incubi which we have dwelt on in the Chaucerian examples. The focus on the visual experience is evident from the first encounter between Olimpias and Nectanabus, when the two do not speak, but stare at each other 'withoute blenchinge of his chere' (line 1868). The first deceit operated by the magician on the queen -- making her believe that the god Amos is in love with her -- is operated by means of 'hevenely figures' and 'a bok ful of peintures' (1893-94). He is, in a way, preparing the queen's eyes for the first nocturnal visitation, which shall consist of nothing more than pure vision. Nectanabus announces 'ye schul have an avision', and this is exactly what happens: he prepares a waxen image and sends it to Olimpias' chamber with the accompaniment of great light, shifting shapes, and voices speaking of love and of a forthcoming, semi-divine child. The reader may at this point wonder why Nectanabus has not chosen this opportunity to assault the queen, since she is so evidently persuaded from the first glimpse she has had of the apparition. But this delay is useful to the author to mark both the queen's error and the magician's sin: 'it was guile and Sorcerie, Al that sche tok for Prophecie', writes the poet (1951-52). It is important that the initial vision remains a vision, so that the reader can grasp the difference between true prophecy and false sorcery even at this level. It is, if we may hazard the comparison, the same distinction Macrobius had made between *visio* and *visum*. This initial vision also sets an aura of ambiguity for the three subsequent experiences, of which only one is something other than purely visual. Even the 'real' one leaves some room for doubt: preparing his entrance in the queen's room, Nectanabus

> putte him out of manes like,
> And of a dragoun tok the forme,
> As he which wolde him al conforme
> To that sche sih in swevene er this.
> (2062-65)

It would seem, from the magician's elaborate and rather unnecessary disguise at this point, that Nectanabus is interested in what he can appear as, rather than in what he is.[37] The whole narrative at this point has been called 'a spectacle',[38] and it certainly works as one both for the protagonists and for the reader. While the avowed intent is to show how deceit and sorcery are always punished in the end, the author's real intention seems to make us experience the same kind of wonder felt by the king and queen, and to make us doubt the veracity of our senses or their ability to distinguish reality from illusion. Throughout the whole tale, Gower has never actually used the word 'incubus', but he

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[37] Once again, this episode reminds us of Boccaccio's tale of Frate Alberto da Imola (*Decameron*, IV, 2), but the differences between the two tales are significant. Boccaccio is mainly interested in the power of persuasion carried by words, first in the friar's wooing of Lisetta, and then in his being persuaded to don the *uomo salvatico* disguise.

[38] Kurt Olsson, *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion: A Reading of the Confessio Amantis*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992, p. 187.

has given us what is possibly the most detailed description of an incubus apparition, in all its variants, that Middle-English literature can offer. In particular, he has shown us how quick and almost imperceptible the passage from apparition to visitation, or, we might say, from nightmare to incubus is. In this attention to the liminal zone between monstruous dreams and nocturnal monsters lies the value of the tale of Nectanabus, and its uniqueness in Middle-English literature. In our context, we can consider this tale as an attempt to enclose under one heading both the insubstantial apparitions of the Chaucerian tales, and the demonic sexual encounters preluding to the birth of Merlin, as described by late medieval English chroniclers and poets.

Before turning our attention to this tradition, we might consider two lines from *Dives and Pauper* (chapter xxi, p. 118):

> And of swych medelyng, as God suffryth, comyn somtyme goode childryn, somtyme wyckyd, somtyme wel schapyn, somtyme euyl schapyn.

The passage reflects what seems to be a common attitude on the part of late medieval English writers on the subject of incubi's offspring. We have already considered the ambivalent attitude, reflected in the Wife of Bath's words, on the possible relation of incubi to Celtic demons. Since the incubi's possibility to beget children, whether by their own means or by stealing a human being's semen, had already been established by the authority of the Church fathers, the matter was no longer an object of debate. The only thing that remained to be considered was the light under which the medieval artist should view the offspring of this type of intercourse. The fact that, more often than not, the semen used in such a union was believed to be of human origin, tends to favour the sort of open-minded view we have seen in the quotation above -- such children could be good or evil, well-shapen or misshapen. It would, however, be a mistake to consider this view as peculiar of the Celtic tradition,[39] since we can find evidence to the contrary in texts of continental origin, clearly belonging to the Catholic ideology. The most significant passage in this sense comes from Sinistrari's *De la demonialité*, and includes an amazing lists of famous children of incubi, complete with bibliographical references:

> *Romulum ac Remum, Liv.* decad. I., *Plutarch.* in vit. Romul., et Parallel.; *Servium Tullium, sextum regem Romanorum, Dionys. Halicar. lib. 4., Plin. lib. 36. c. 27.; Platonem Philosophum, Laer. l. 9.* de Vit. Philos., *D. Hyeron. l. I.* Controvers. Jovinian.; *Alexandrum Magnum, Plutarch.*, in vit. Alex. M., *Quint. Curt., l. 4.* de Gest. Alex. M.; *Seleucum, regem Syriae, Just.*, Hist. l. 15., *Appian.*, in Syriac.; *Scipionem Africanum Majorem, Liv.*, decad. *3. lib. 6.; Caesarem Augustum Imperatorem, Sueton.*, in Octa. *c. 94.; Aristomenem Messenium, strenuissimum ducem Graecorum, Strabo*, de Sit. Orb. *lib. 8., Pausan.* de Rebus Graecor. *lib. 3., et Merlinum, seu Melchinum Anglicum ex Incubo et Filia Caroli Magni Moniali, Hauller, volum. 2. Generat. 7.; quod etiam de Martino Luthero, perditissimo Heresiarca, scribit Cocleus apud Maluendam,* de Antich. *lib. 2. c. 6.* § Caeterum (pp. 48-50).

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[39] As Nicolas Kiessling does: 'The Celtic tradition … represents a significant departure from the Latin-Christian view that all copulating spirits were demons from hell and that their offspring by human partners could hardly be better' (p. 44).

Apart from the fact that they are all men, the people listed do not seem to have much in common. Moreover, Sinistrari's judgement of them varies greatly: it is evident that not all of them are classified, as is the case with Luther, as 'perditissimo Heresiarca'. In fact, other authors will use this peculiar lineage as a reason to explain particular gifts, whether spiritual or intellectual. Such is the case presented by John Capgrave, who says of Aristotle that his being born from an incubus was the cause of 'the lithness of his body, an the sotilte of his witte'.[40]

Only one of the famous people listed by Sinistrari is called 'Anglicum', and he is the one with whom English writers most concern themselves. Although the story of Merlin in the context of the Arthurian myth is probably of French origin, the legend related to his birth finds its most appropriate collocation between England and Wales, and is referred to by French writers only marginally. The first occurrence we know of comes from the *Historia Brittonum* compiled by Nennius, or Nynmiaw, a Welsh clerk of the ninth century.[41] The first appearance of our hero is in the presence of king Vortigern, or Guorthigirnus, usurper of the throne of Britain, who wanted to have an inaccessible castle built on the border of his kingdom, and could not do so, according to his magicians, until he had found a child who had no father. In Nennius this child is not known as Merlin, and is simply described as 'homo sine pater'; he shall later explain that he is the illegitimate son of a Roman consul. Yet this source gives us two important clues that distinguish this character from his French counterpart. One is the Welsh origin and context, that eliminates the usual Arthurian associations. The other is the name that is used, Ambrosius, which appears here possibly for the first time and will be used by most of the English and Welsh writers on the subject. The name is made to derive from Embreis Guletic, or Dynas Emrys, later explained in Giraldus Cambrensis' *Itinerarium Kambriae* as 'promontorium Ambrosii'. But the fusion between this Welsh magician and the better-known Merlin will be made by Geoffrey of Monmouth, who, in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1134), conflates the traditional story of Merlin with Nennius' narration, and for the first time mentions the incubus origin. In Geoffrey a new character appears, the magician's mother, who answers Vortigern's questions on the conception of her child with a rather long story about a 'pulcherrimus iuvenis' and his apparition to her in a room full of other young women to whom he is, however, invisible -- a motif we shall also find in one of the two religious tales transcribed in the Appendix. It is only at a later stage that his visits become 'in specie hominis', and he disappears once the woman finds herself pregnant. At this point the 'bishop' (which we should probably read as 'druid') Maugentius explains how 'inter lunam et terram

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[40] John Capgrave, *The Chronicle of England*, ed. Frances C. Hingeston, London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts, 1858, p. 52.

[41] Nennius, 'Historia Brittonum', in *British History and the Welsh Annals*, ed. John Morris, London: Phillimore, 1980, pp. 70-72.

habitant spiritus, quos incubos demones appellamus. Hii partim habent naturam hominum, partim vero angelorum. & cum volunt asumunt sibi humanas figuras. & cum mulieribus coeunt',[42] and to support his authority he mentions Apuleius' *De Deo Socratis*. Needless to say, there is no mention of incubi in Apuleius, and this, added to Geoffrey's conflation of the Nennius narrative with the legendary material on the Arthurian Merlin, gives us the measure of his original contribution to the myth. We can thus attribute to Geoffrey of Monmouth the creation of the first British incubus-originated hero, and the whole narration of his conception. The story is not repeated in the *Vita Merlini* by the same author, but reappears, first of all, in some of the early translations of the *Historia*, such as Wace's *Brut*, which in this particular instance is nothing more than a faithful rendering of the original. It shall also be repeated, almost word by word, in later works, such as John Hardyng's *Chronicle*, or Layamon's *Brut*. A variant form is offered Robert Manning of Brunne's *Story of England*: the mother here is no generic virgin, but a princess, and a nun. This trait is possibly an echo of some of the legends surrounding the birth of Charlemagne. Moreover, while the description of the incubus' assault does not differ from the traditional version, the explanation of Maugentius is more detailed than in Geoffrey, including a brief description of the incubi's movements between the moon and the earth, and even a new name for them: not only 'incuby/demones', but 'ffendes-in-bedde', a name corresponding with particular precision to the image of the incubus as a night assailant appearing to the victim like a frightful apparition out of a bad dream. More interesting, however, is another translation of the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, in a Welsh MS at Jesus College, Oxford.[43] In this text the explanation provided by Maugentius runs thus: 'when Lyssyfer and the evil angels who sinned with him, in the places and in the forms under which they were when God bade them cease, in those places they are to this day, and some of them are able to assume the form of women, and some of men'. The new version involves not only a transformation of Geoffrey's generic 'spiritus', but a precise link to a Christian theology that was only alluded to in the original text, and that can be inscribed within the process of progressive Christianization of symbols and aspects of the Celtic cult of natural forces that took place during the High Middle Ages in Great Britain. We can assume at this point that it is to the demon whose origin has been so accurately hypothesized by the Welsh compiler that later writers refer to when they describe the demon whose attack against a young virgin resulted in the conception of Merlin. It is thus that we should probably read the 'daemon incubus' mentioned by Giraldus Cambrensis (1147-1222) in his *Itinerarium Kambriae* (I,5).

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[42] 'Between the moon and the earth live some spirits we call demons incubi. They are partly men, and partly angels. And, when they wish, they assume a human shape, and go with women'. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, ed. Robert E. Jones, Acton Griscom, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1929, pp. 381-82.

[43] MS n° LXI, folio 94. The modern English translation from which I am quoting is provided in the 1929 edition of the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, pp. 381-82.

Although, as we have seen, this part of the Merlin legend originated in Britain, to the extent that some English historians confused the issue by declaring that there were two Merlins,[44] some of the most intriguing additions to the established tradition came from a French poet, Robert de Boron, who wrote a *Merlin* in the first years of the thirteenth century. The general structure of the work is modelled on Geoffrey of Monmouth, but the description of the conception of Merlin becomes a much more colourful affair, involving a plot of the devils who are trying to create an Antichrist in order to avenge Christ's harrowing of hell but fail because of the virtuous nature of Merlin's mother.[45] Merlin maintains, however, some Satanic qualities, such as a certain impishness and the ability to change his shape whenever he wishes, as well as his knowledge of past, present, and future. While this last quality seems to have been inserted only to answer the practical requirements of the narration, the first two are of particular interest for us, since they relate this Merlin to impish wood-demons of the Celtic tradition, such as Robin Goodfellow, or to semi-human creatures that Middle-English poets describe as possessing the 'shape-shifting art', such as Nectanabus in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (see above).

The last two texts we are going to examine belong to the fifteenth century, and are both Middle-English versions of Robert de Boron's poem, more or less faithful to the original. The first is a *Merlin* by Herry Lovelich (1450), and the second an anonymous *Merlin, or the Early History of King Arthur* (1450-60).[46] As we can see from one of the titles, in these poems the distinction between the Welsh 'Merlin Ambrosius' and the Arthurian 'Merlin Silvestris' has been dropped. Also, in both cases the supernatural story that constitutes the preliminary to the incubus visitation has been considerably enlarged, until the plot of the devils becomes a satanic congress of almost Miltonic proportions, leaving the reader in no doubt as to the hellish origin of the incubus, while the process of seducing a suitable woman becomes a long and slightly melodramatic enterprise, involving holy men giving good counsel and harlots leading to temptation. The tendency seems to be less towards an impish and somewhat amusing demon and more toward a semi-divine being that has escaped being an Antichrist only by the narrowest of margins. Both works, in short, sound much nearer the Catholic dogma on incubi as we have seen it in the writings of the Church Fathers and in the

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[44] The earliest source that pronounces a definite opinion on this subject is Giraldus Cambrensis, who declares 'erant enim Merlini duo; iste qui et Ambrosius dictus est, quia binomius fuerat, et sub rege Vortigerno prophetizavit, ab incubo genitus, et apud Kaermerdyn [Keirmerdhin] inventus; unde et ab ipso ibidem invento denominata est Kaermerdyn, id est, urbs Merlini; alter vero de Albania oriundus' (II,8). The second is sometimes called Silvestris, and is the magician at King Arthur's court. This version is confirmed by Ranulph Higden, who in his *Polychronicon* (XIII century) explains 'Albania' as 'Scotland', and by others. There seems to be a third Merlin, called Merlin Caledonius, in Scottish folklore, but in this particular case I have found no link with the incubus tradition.

[45] See Peter Goodrich, ed., *The Romance of Merlin: An Anhology*, New York and London: Garland, 1990, p. 101-2.

[46] Herry Lovelich, *Merlin: A Middle-English Metrical Version of a French Romance*, ed. Ernst A. Koch, London: Oxford University Press, 1904, and *Merlin, Or the Early History of King Arthur*, ed. Henry B. Wheatley, London: Trübner, 1869.

Malleus Maleficarum, once we compare them to their immediate French model, or indeed to the early English chroniclers previously taken into consideration. There are some minor variations on the 'standard' incubus -- the devil that undertakes to 'sowe seede in woman', in the anonymous version, declares his ability to do so without the help of somebody else's semen -- but, on the whole, the two romances offer little novelty and seem both to be stretching the material handed down from the chroniclers' tradition to an excessive extent.

Thus the legend of the supernatural conception of Merlin becomes progressively less interesting, and slowly dies out. In his *Morte D'Arthur* (1469), Malory shall not dwell on it, though he implicitly accepts the tradition by calling Merlin 'a devyls son' (vol. I, p. 126, lines 20-21). Later chroniclers, such as Raphael Holinshed, will not retell the story at all, not believing it to be true. There is, however, a late revival of the legend in the shape of *The Birth of Merlin*, a play occasionally attributed to Shakespeare but probably datable around 1660.[47] The play takes up the tradition of Merlin Ambrosius, taking most of its historical structure from Geoffrey of Monmouth, and filling in the gaps with a tragedy of love and treason, and with numerous invocations reflecting a curiously mixed theology in the true tradition of Jacobean theatre. Thus, for instance, the Devil, who is present at the birth of Merlin, shall call on 'Squint ey'd *Erichto*, midnight *Incubus*' (III, iii, 130). From a purely literary point of view, the text is uninteresting, and it adds very little of value to the Merlin legend. But it constitutes some evidence of the longevity of the tradition we have been analyzing, and of its surviving well into the seventeenth century.

Before leaving this subject altogether, it is worthwhile to dwell on a poem that seems to be very much related to what we have been considering so far: the anonymous *Sir Gowther*, a fifteenth-century romance.[48] The link with Merlin is made obvious by the opening invocation of the poem, in which the author asks God to shield humanity from the fiend 'that is about manys sowle to shende' (line 5) and that 'bigat Merlyng and mo' (10). Apparently, Gowther was 'bigat' in the same manner as Merlin. This time, however, it is not because of a devils' plot, but by the intercession of God and the Virgin Mary, whom a young and married lady has prayed in order that they might help her in her childless state. In a Christian variation of a common fairy-tale pattern, the lady makes the mistake of asking to conceive a child 'on what maner, scho ne roghth'. Therefore she will experience the nocturnal devil's visitation, and subsequently give birth to a child, Gowther, who was 'Marlyon halfe brodur'. *Sir Gowther* can be considered a variation on the development of the Merlin theme as we have seen it so far, involving folkloric overtones that, despite the frequent mentions of Mary and God,

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[47] *The Birth of Merlin*, ed. Joanna Udall, London: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 1991.

[48] *Sir Gowther*, ed. Karl Breul, Oppeln: Eugen Franck's Buchhandlung, 1886.

bring the hero of the poem and the legend of his conception away from Lovelich's quaint pandemonium, and closer to the popular tradition of a mischievous demon that appears in the orchard assuming, for good measure, the appearance of the lady's husband, only to reveal himself later on as a 'felturd fende' and announce to the woman

> y have geyton a chylde on the,
> That in his yothe full wylde schall bee
> And weppons wyghtly weld.
> (76-78)

The three stages of our analysis of the incubus in Middle-English literature have revealed three stages of the process of familiarization with the monster. The late Middle Ages in England are a critical moment in this respect. As we have seen, the shift in cultural perspective implicit in the process of Christianization implies a new treatment of a series of minor deities, natural phenomena or forces which had been more or less peacefully assimilated by the pre-existent 'pagan' traditions. Those frightening nocturnal visions, which had appeared under different names according to geographical and ethnological areas, are now homologated under the common rubric of *incubi demonii*, devilish forces whose decidedly negative connotations leave little room for further speculation about their nature. But at this point a different process begins to take place. Once the incubi have been identified as satanic beings, as monsters, the best way to exorcize them is to make them familiar, to make them part of an everyday experience, so that while their evil power is maintained intact, they lose their *Unheimlichkeit*, and become accepted in a particular culture. The examples analyzed in this study are instances of different processes of assimilation, producing different results, but they all seem to subscribe to a principle admirably described by this passage:

> 'Occorre salvarsi dalla cavalcata dei Mostri: e l'unico mezzo risolutivo appare, paradossalmente, salvare i Mostri stessi, impedire che la loro putrefazione ammorbi lo spirito (e il Libro), e rinvigorirli, rifocillarli, per meglio guidarli e insegnar loro le regole del vivere civile, e le buone maniere a tavola'.[49]

A p p e n d i x

The two texts that follow are two religious tales, or *exempla*, hitherto unpublished, concerning incubi apparitions. They appear together in a manuscript of the late XIII century (MS, London, British Library, Royal 7.D.i). The first tale is also copied in MS, London, British Library, Harley 206 (XV century), folio 112 verso, and the second is copied in MS, London, British Library, Additional 33956 (XIV century), folio 86 verso. I have here transcribed the texts as they appear in the first manuscript,

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[49] 'We need to save ourselves from the stampede of the Monsters, and the only effective way appears to be, paradoxically, that of saving the Monsters themselves, preventing their putrefaction from contaminating the spirit (and the Book), and strengthening and feeding them, in order to guide and teach them the rules of civil life and good table manners.' Corrado Bologna, ed., *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus. Libro delle mirabili difformità*, Milano: Bompiani, 1977, p. 13.

expanding the abbreviations. The classical spelling is used throughout, and the punctuation is modernized. The most significant variations appearing in the later manuscripts are recorded in the footnotes. Each tale is prefaced by the description appearing in J.A. Herbert's *Catalogue of Romances in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum*.

1. Royal 7.D.i, folio 117 - *A nun accepts the embraces of an incubus, but afterwards repents and confesses* (Herbert 29)

Fuit[a] in monasterio quodam foeminarum iuvencula quaedam virilis inexperta[b] contactus, quae cum violentas suae carnis temptationes sentiret, delectari coepit in spurcis[c] cogitationibus, quod temptator advertens apparuit ei in specie iuvenis, coepitque cum ea iocare et ad consensum allicere. Quae tandem plus frequentes eius accessus et iocose ei substravit diuque a demonio incubo foedidissime[d] polluta, omnes modos detestandae libidinis in se experta est. Denique, cuidam religioso viro foeditatem suam confessa, non putabat se carnis virginitatem amisisse, quia novit se ab homine incognitam extitisse, cui ille ad detestationem criminis ei manifestandam ait: 'Non te virginem aestimes, sed meretricem detestabilem et tanto immundiorem quanto non ab homine sed a demonio tantam passa es foeditatem'.

2. Royal 7.D.i, folio 119 verso - *A woman, haunted by an incubus, resists him until he has killed her husband and one of her two sons, and blinded her. After confession she is freed by his visits, but one day she curses her son in anger and he dies three days later* (Herbert 117)

Retulit mihi quidam vir religiosus fide dignus et moribus ornatus scire se mulierem adhuc superstitem quae ei talia frequenter confessa est.[e] Dum esset in domo patris sui xvi annorum, apparuit ei quidam in habitu nobili. Frequenter quandoque in serico quandoque in vestibus deauratis indutus, sollicitans illam ut ei consentiret ad carnalem copulam, et quandoque dum sederet in aula cum aliis accessit ille et osculabatur eam, nemine tamen percipiente[f] propter ipsam. Interea haec copulatur cuidam viro in matrimonio. Sed ipse diabolus propter hoc non desistit a sollicitatione, illa vero semper ei resistens duos filios genuit ex marito legitimo. Cum autem semel iaceret in puerperio, accessit ille demon dicens mulieri iacenti: 'Non nisi consentias, ego te confundam vehementer et auferam a te quicquid dilexeris super terram'. Mulieris

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[a]] Harley has a title: "Qualiter diabolus decipit eos qui delectantur in turpibus cogitationibus".
[b]] experta (Harley).
[c]] malis (Harley).
[d]] ferventissime (Harley).
[e]] retulit quaedam bona mulier secreto quod dum esset (Additional).
[f]] nemine sciente hoc aut percipiente (Additional).

iterum illius resistentis diabolus oculos insufflavit. Et statim post hoc penitus visum amisit. Quo facto, vir eius velociter obiit, postea et filius eius similiter quem multum dilexerat. Illi igitur mulieri propter dictos casus vehementer dolenti apparuit rursus ille demon dicens ei: 'Si adhuc velis consentire, faciam tibi oculos et visum tuum recuperare'. Illa vero hoc audiens concessit ei quod petierat, credens ex hoc visum recuperare. Cum autem consensisset illa mulier illi demonio, statim tentavit eam valde viribus et postea cum ipsa concubuit; moxque post hoc venter eius vehementer intumescere coepit. Nec tamen visum in aliquo recuperavit. Quod cum perciperet mulier dixit demoni: 'Quare non redditur mihi lumen oculorum meorum ut mihi promisisti?'. Ille vero, mendax spiritus et pater mendacium, volens eam amplius decipere dixit ei: 'Non adhuc habebis visum tuum'. Mulier autem videns se deceptam a demone, misit pro confessore discreto ei saeviem et processum dura negotii manifestavit. Cum autem confessa esset, statim venter[g] eius detumescere coepit et post hoc mirabiliter[h] liquor emanare. Post confessionem mulieris numquam postea ad eam demonem accedere potuit. Sed postea prope eam accedens frequenter eam tumultu terruit. Mulier praefata adhuc hominis unum filium cum quodam tempore irata filium suum malediceret. Ecce filius ille quasi subito enim tertium diem obiit. Qui mihi praedictam retulit celari ad tempus voluit locum ubi illa contigerunt et mulieris praefatae nomen.

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[g]] uterus (Additional).
[h]] mirabilis (Additional).